

## Introduction

**ENERGY POVERTY (EP):** the inability of a household to afford or access sufficient energy to meet its needs and live a decent life<sup>[1]</sup>

- Attributed to high energy costs, poor energy efficiency, low-incomes, and energy policy<sup>[2]</sup>
- Can result in negative physical and mental health outcomes<sup>[2]</sup>
- Disproportionately impacts lower income households and marginalized groups, children, seniors, and those with pre-existing health conditions<sup>[1],[3]</sup>
- An estimated 6-19% Canadian households are in EP, but it is not on the national policy agenda<sup>[1]</sup>

### RESEARCH IMPETUS:

- When issues receive media attention, they tend to rank higher on the political agenda<sup>[4],[5]</sup>
- The subjective nature of media prominently features some dimensions of an issue while overlooking others<sup>[6]</sup>
- The media's framing of EP can provide insight on how future policy may intervene and with what results



Source: Financial Times

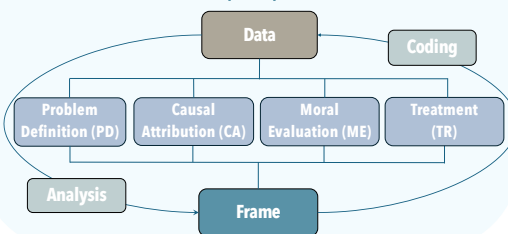
### RESEARCH QUESTION(S):

- How is EP framed in Canadian mainstream media?
- How do these framings vary over space and time?
- How do they compare to the findings of scholars?
- What are the policy implications of these framings?

## Methodology

1. Retrieved articles in English and French from Canadian media outlets (date range: 2003-2024)
  - Search #1: "energy poverty"
  - Search #2: (energy OR electricity OR hydro OR utilit\*) AND (cost\* OR bill\*) AND low-income AND (heating OR cooling) AND hous\*
2. Pre-screened articles to develop "frames"
  - "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text"<sup>[7]</sup>
3. Coding: Using Nvivo 14, go through articles, collect quotes (data) and code them into frames
4. Analysis: Group data into reoccurring themes within each frame

FIG 1. Framing analysis methodology adapted from Foley et al. (2019)<sup>[8]</sup>



## Findings

The media articles frame EP in 4 ways: **Affordability, Climate, Health, and Housing**

FIG. 2 NUMBER OF REFERENCES PER FRAME IN ALL ARTICLES (N= 874)

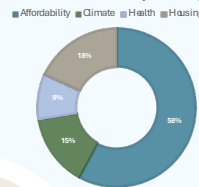


FIG. 3 NUMBER OF REFERENCES IN ARTICLES CONTAINING TERM 'ENERGY POVERTY' (n= 318)

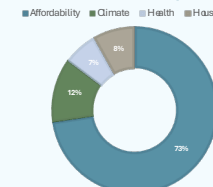


FIG. 4 NUMBER OF ARTICLES PER FRAME BY YEAR

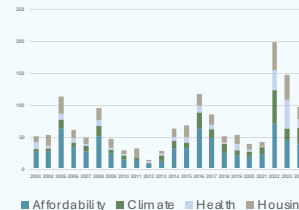


FIG. 5 NUMBER OF ARTICLES PER FRAME BY PROVINCE/TERRITORY



### AFFORDABILITY

*In many cases, a family isn't doing anything wrong. It's not like they're neglecting their bills, it's just that they can't pay rent when their gas and hydro bills keep going up"* (North Bay Nugget, 2004)

**PD:** Trade-offs (i.e., heat or eat), homelessness, cut-offs/arrears, impacts on marginalized groups

**CA:** Energy costs, heating type, geographic location, socioeconomic status (SES), policy

**TR:** Efficiency upgrades, financial assistance to lower income households, rate regulation/moratoriums on disconnections

**ME:** Energy is a right and the government should ensure that vulnerable populations are protected from high costs

### CLIMATE

*"Using environmentally friendly energy sources, such as solar and wind power, will tip more people into energy poverty"* (Winnipeg Free Press, 2017)

**PD:** Higher energy prices and uncomfortable indoor conditions

**CA:** Energy transition, home energy emissions, (extreme) weather events, inadequate infrastructure

**TR:** Efficiency upgrades, update building codes, improved access to air conditioning, financial assistance/rebates, tech/alternative forms of energy

**ME:** While action on climate change is necessary, the government must ensure a just transition away from fossil-fuel-based energy

### HEALTH

*"Victims of so-called "energy poverty" face health risks from lowering heat and air conditioning to avoid peak daytime hours and rising energy fees"* (The Toronto Sun, 2011)

**PD:** Fatalities, effects on general and mental health, trade-offs (i.e., forgoing food or medicine)

**CA:** Pre-existing conditions, SES, housing conditions, policy

**TR:** Efficiency upgrades, increased access to air conditioning, neighborhood level improvements

**ME:** Health is a right and the government should ensure that vulnerable people are protected from energy-poverty-related poor health outcomes

### HOUSING

*"One In three British Columbians who rent their homes face barriers to installing a new heating or cooling system, mostly due to their limited control over household energy systems"* (The Province, 2023)

**PD:** Insufficient household energy leads to use of dangerous coping mechanisms and/or substandard indoor living conditions

**CA:** Tenure, physical conditions of the home, geographic location, neighborhood

**TR:** efficiency upgrades/retrofits, amendments to building codes, increased tenant protection, and community-level infrastructure upgrades

**ME:** Adequate housing is a universal right that must be upheld by the government and landlords

## Discussion

### ENERGY POVERTY AS A SYSTEMIC ISSUE

- EP is not a problem of individual failing but rather caused by systemic problems
- Recognition of socially-patterned risk of EP for lower-income households, older adults, chronically ill, and marginalized communities
- Solutions require government intervention

### NARROW FRAMING

- Coverage focuses significantly more on affordability, rather than health, housing, or climate
- Differences between search queries suggest that articles mentioning 'energy poverty' might not be providing a complete definition of the issue
- Most prominent voices are of politicians and spokespeople, not of people in situations of EP

### SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL DIFFERENCES

- The overall number of references and the salience of different frames differs over time and by province
- Ontario has the most references across all frames followed by:
  - Québec and NB for Affordability
  - BC for Health and Climate
  - Québec for Housing

## Conclusions

- The articles demonstrate a shifting understanding of EP over time
  - e.g., access to cooling becomes more important as climate change progresses
- The inconsistent and incomplete coverage of EP in MSM may have negative policy implications
  - Framing EP predominantly as affordability issue eschews the responsibility to create permanent solutions<sup>[5]</sup>
  - Solutions risk not being targeted enough, leaving some vulnerable groups unidentified and unprotected
- The lack of personal experiences being featured may also lead to public indifference about EP<sup>[5]</sup>
- More research needed to understand provincial contexts and why some frames are more prevalent than others

## References

- [1] Riva et al. (2021). Energy poverty in Canada: Prevalence, social and spatial distribution, and implications for research and policy. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 81, 102237; [2] Riva et al. (2023). Energy poverty: An overlooked determinant of health and climate resilience in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 114(3), 422-431; [3] Middlemiss (2022). Who is vulnerable to energy poverty in the Global North, and what is their experience? *WIREs Energy and Environment*, 11(6); [4] Bakaki et al. (2019). The triangular relationship between public concern for environmental issues, policy output, and media attention. *Environmental Politics*, 29(7), 1157-1177; [5] Severnas (2017). How mass media attract political elites' attention. *European Journal of Political Research*, 57(1), 153-170; [6] Yoon & Hernández (2021). Energy, energy, read all about it: A thematic analysis of energy insecurity in the U.S. mainstream media from 1980 to 2019. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 74, 101972; [7] Entman (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58; [8] Foley et al. (2019). Innovating qualitative framing analysis for purposes of media analysis within Public Health Inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(12), 1810-1822.

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